

STAT

The Leak Ballet

We have been watching with fascination the little ballet over news leaks being staged by Secretary of State Kissinger, Rep. Otis Pike, Daniel Schorr, and the heads of various Middle Eastern governments. To those who fail to understand the stylized choreography, we offer a primer:

News leaks can only be understood as weapons in intragovernment debate, attempts to build public support for public men or public policies. One party releases such classified information as helps his side of the case, attaching to it his own interpretation or leaking it through newsmen with sympathetic views. Often contending parties feel the first leak is not the truth, and retaliate with leaks of their own. On occasion some harm may be done to national security, but almost always the true reason for the screaming is that someone's political toe has been pinched.

With this briefing, the choreography becomes entirely transparent. *Of course* the Pike Committee report on intelligence abuses was leaked, that is what it was *for*. *Of course* Mr. Kissinger tried to divert attention from its content by attacking the leak, that is what is *always done*. It's delicious that, on the heels of this flap, leaked quotes from Mr. Kissinger's Middle Eastern conversations appear in a flattering article in Foreign Policy. *Of course* Mr. Kissinger is now huffing and puffing about stopping leaks in his own department, *what else?*

We only hope that some poor underling doesn't have his career ruined. Mr. Kissinger said he authorized "help" for the Foreign Policy article, but not secret documents. (Essentially the same claim he made with even less plausibility when asked at his confirmation hearings about authorizing leaks for the SALT book "Cold Dawn.") The State Department promises that it will discipline the underling who actually provided the documents.

The official spokesman for the department says that in deciding on the severity of punishment it will consider the "motive" for the leak. In other words, a leak resulting from over-exuberance in puffing Mr. Kissinger and his policies rates a slap on the wrist. But if someone who disagrees is guilty of a leak he will be drawn and quartered. This gives you an idea about where the real damage from leaks is perceived to lie.

tain aura of privacy would attach to conversations with foreign diplomats, arms negotiations with Russia, and top-level discussions within our own government. Much of the world does operate on the basis of confidences, as newsmen above all know. And there are codes and the like that can be jeopardized. Beyond doubt leaks can get out of hand.

Also beyond doubt, though, they are hard to dispense with in a democratic form of government. There ought to be some public debate, after all, about such important topics as vital arms negotiations or the abuse of the CIA. Since everything about them is classified, such debate can scarcely proceed except on the basis of "leaks." And the debate profits when there are leaks from both sides of the intragovernmental debate, not merely one.

The personal discretion of officials is normally sufficient to sort out the necessary leaks from the truly damaging ones. But this discretion depends on a certain mutual trust among contending officials. Within an administration it helps, for example, if all officials feel they can speak their minds without getting fired, and if leaks from their opponents do not distort the debate too severely. It helps if Congress feels it will always be told the truth, and if the Executive feels that congressional inquiries are legitimate and not merely intended to destroy. It is when one side feels it is being railroaded that leaks get out of hand.

A good deal of the recent problem is a hold-over from the passions of the Vietnam war. But Secretary Kissinger has a special problem, since one of his more remarkable accomplishments has been to develop the leak into a new art. His genius was to leak so often and so openly it became accepted behavior. By now, when he gives the press secret information to build public support for his case it is a routine "backgrounder." When his bureaucratic opponents reply it is a "leak."

The problem will go away, though leaks will remain, when certain bonds of trust are renewed both with Congress and within the administration itself. Meanwhile, the leak ballet is good entertainment, and we will know Secretary Kissinger is serious about leaks the moment he puts all those backgrounders on the record and takes full and clear responsibility for what is said